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# THE SUNDAY SCHOOL AS A CHURCH PROBLEM

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GEORGE D. BLACK, D.D.

Acting President of Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio

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Among the problems confronting the church is the one of the pressing need of increased efficiency in the Sunday school.

As a disseminator of Bible knowledge the Sunday school is far from satisfactory. The chief trouble with it is that it is not abreast of the foremost scholarship of the world in its attitude toward the Bible. I do not mean that it is not accepting and using the advanced positions of higher criticism, or pressing into view ideas and conclusions about which there is considerable ground of controversy. The failure is to use the light which is manifestly the result of a consensus of opinion of the soundest and most distinguished scholars of the world. Few would contend that the Sunday school is reflecting the work of our most noted theological seminaries. The last twenty-five years have seen a remarkable advance in Bible study. All the resources of the ablest and most devoted experts have been tirelessly given to research along many lines that give light upon the Scriptures. Our seminaries and universities have been leaders in this great work. It may be justly said that the Sunday school cannot afford to hurry into teaching that is not backed by sound and reliable scholarship. There need be no contention about that. But can it be fairly asserted that the American Sunday school does in any noteworthy degree utilize the work of our best seminaries and our highest

Bible authorities? I think not, and I am sure that this is the judgment of many others.

For example, in how many Sunday schools is it not still held substantially and taught that the Bible is inerrant, that all parts of it are equally inspired and authoritative? If others have found any marked number that do not proceed upon this idea of the Bible, they have been more fortunate than I have been, or than my informants have been. And yet if ever there was anything especially adapted to injure Bible study and to keep the Bible away from the hearts of the people, it is that same doctrine of infallibility. It has put a burden on the Scriptures which they cannot bear. It is making them stand for what they nowhere claim. It is attempting to compel people to accept as God-inspired stories and ideas that are nothing but the expression of the crudeness of primitive tribes, and that are repugnant to our sense of truth and justice. If the Sermon on the Mount and the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians are divinely inspired, then the last chapter of II Samuel is not. No amount of word jugglery can convince healthy-minded boys and girls in the eighth-school grade that they are equally trustworthy and equally valuable. If they are so taught, or if they are urged to believe that God did the thing attributed to him in the last chapter of II

Samuel, irreparable damage is done to their religious sense. They are coming soon to the time when they will either learn the truth about the Bible and be saved from indifference to it, or else they will reject all of it as of one piece. Bacon says in the beginning of his essay on "superstition": "It were better to have no opinion of God at all than such an opinion as is unworthy of him." And he quotes approvingly Plutarch, who says: "Surely I had rather a great deal men should say there was no such man at all as Plutarch than that they should say that there was one Plutarch that would eat his children as soon as they were born."

The doctrine of an inerrant Bible has done more than any other influence to damage the church. It has set the book aside as a talismanic fetish. It has backed up untold theological nostrums that have afflicted a long-suffering world. One hundred and fifty sects in this country have gone to it for support for their bewildering doctrines, and each one takes the book "just as it reads," and sets forth plentiful Scriptures to prove the divine authority for its existence. Bright children in the public schools are coming to see through the fallacy of the infallible Scripture dogma, and it is not going to win them to the church much longer.

Why burden the church and Sunday school with it? The Bible does not claim anywhere to be infallible. The leading scholars of the world have utterly discarded the theory. It puts insufferable burdens upon the mind and heart. It gives every unfriendly critic of the Bible and of the church his best weapon of attack. It bids believers accept

views of God that make him to be less than an ordinarily good man.

Furthermore, if the Sunday school is to have and to maintain a desirable hold on the young people it must square itself with the facts of the world and of life. There is no reason why the teaching of the Sunday school should contradict the things that young people are learning in the public schools and in the colleges. They are studying history, anthropology, geology, psychology, and biology; and if they go from their classrooms to the Bible class or to the church and hear views of the world presented that do not agree at all with what science has already taught them, confusion is introduced into their minds, with the likelihood that the Bible will be discredited.

Once more: We require a person who wants to teach biology or physics or literature to have an adequate training for it. But almost anybody of good intentions and moral standing in the church is called upon to teach the greatest book in the world, requiring years of patient study to master it and calling for light from many fields of human endeavor. The Sunday schools are burdened with teachers whose chief qualification for their work is their good-will. The other day an educated woman was earnestly considering whether she would continue to send her children to the Sunday school of a large and influential church in her city. She said:

I know that much they are learning there will have to be unlearned in after-years. There is no seriously enlightened effort to tell them the truth about the Bible. The most they hear is made up of pious remarks, coming from nice but uninformed people. I should like my children to be made friends of the Bible—the Bible as it is known by those who are today the

most competent to have an opinion about it, and not as it was regarded a hundred or two hundred years ago.

The writer's work for a number of years has been that of conducting a Bible department in a college where a Bible course is required for graduation. The young people who take this course are from Christian homes for the most part, and have had the regular Sunday-school opportunities. They are generally bright, promising students. But their ignorance of the Bible is almost incredible. At the beginning of the course there is scarcely one that can pass an examination in the most primary lessons in biblical history and teachings. What they do know, or think they know, is about two-thirds wrong. It is doubtful if one could defend himself against an attack directed against his Christian faith, if the defense depended upon his Bible information.

And these young people are representative, coming as they do from our American Christian homes, and are fairly illustrative of the failure of the American Sunday school to teach the Bible. I have just now come upon this statement from Charles Foster Kent of Yale:

We must admit that most of our Sunday schools, with their vast resources in opportunity, in financial support, and in the devotion of the teachers and officers, do not permanently hold their scholars, and in the great majority of cases do not give them a thorough or systematic knowledge, even of the most vital teachings of the Bible. The ignorance of its literature and history on the part of even the more intelligent students who enter college, is almost past belief, as many of us can testify from personal observation.

As I have gone on with my work year after year and young men and young

women have come and gone, I have had a growing conviction of the serious inadequacy of Sunday-school work. It is a deficiency that is fundamental. There is no lack of devotion and financial support and of convention enthusiasm, but the Bible is not brought home to the minds and hearts of young people as it should be.

It must be confessed that the outlook for relief is not encouraging. When one remembers the vast denominational structures that are built around creeds and how hard it is ever to change one of their declarations however outgrown it may be, and even when it is no longer believed by the majority, one is not very hopeful that much can be done just now to relieve the Sunday-school situation. So long as the Bible is held to be outside the normal currents of our human life and enshrouded in a vast system of supernaturalism, it will continue to be read and taught as a kind of talismanic charm. Young people will still find a confusing variance between what they hear in Sunday school and what they learn in the public schools and colleges. They are learning that there is an elemental unity of things; that life is woven throughout of one stuff, and that one part does not contradict another part; that God is God in the clod, in the flower, in the star, in the heart of man, and in the whole round world of human striving and failing and loving and succeeding; and when religion is presented to them as an alien thing, at odds with the facts of the world, we may be very certain that they will cling to the things that their reason has already accepted as true and right.